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## THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF FAITH

### I. THE PROBLEM

For the accountability of belief the response to the question of whether religious experience is rational is important. That which we claim for Christian faith should also obtain for religious experience: religious experience transcends human reason but does not destroy it. Nevertheless, there is a problem here. Is the concept 'religious experience' not self-contradictory, thereby justifying the accusation that it is irrational? Accusations of irrationality seem out of place, however, for religious experience is a broadly accepted term, used in the titles of such well-known books as William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience*. There are innumerable accounts of people who have had religious experiences: the mystical experiences of St. John of the Cross or St. Theresa of Avila, or the sudden conversion experiences of believers that James describes. There is also religious experience as a lasting experience of the 'ordinary believer', on the basis of which he lives with and understands the world and people and which informs how he acts.

Philosophically, however, one can pose the question of whether an *experience* of religious Transcendence is at all possible. Experience implies, according to Husserl, intentionality, i.e. the intention of the subject to direct himself at something. Does this not conflict with the uniqueness of the manifestation of God who announces himself, regardless of any intention on the part of the human being? Is the experience of God not a matter of a call to us that breaks through our horizon instead of one of our directing ourselves at Something or Someone? This problem has been posed by Levinas and has received attention by Henry and Marion in contemporary French philosophy. But long before that philosophers such as Descartes and Kant and theologians such as Schleiermacher and Tillich understood that there was a problem here. How is religious Transcendence, which overcomes human beings, to be described? How is religious experience to be described, if it transcends not only

the subject/object relation but also all mundane relations? Thus the term ‘religious experience’ seems to be a *contradictio in terminis* because the contact with God cannot be described in terms of intentionality, of engagement with something that belongs to this world.

In this paper I will demonstrate that one can speak of religious *experience* and that religious experience is not a-rational but rational in nature. This allows, of course, for the possibility that any number of actual religious experiences can be irrational through imagination or an illusory belief. I will investigate the extent to which living on the basis of a lasting religious experience entails fideism, the view that religious experience cannot be discussed rationally.

I will first take up the question of whether religious experience is a self-contradictory concept. Thereafter I will elaborate on my assertion that religious experience is rational in nature by indicating what religious experience is and what rationality is. Religious experience appears to have at least three aspects. For now, I will describe it as an experience in which the whole person is gripped by religious Transcendence. I view rationality as a normative concept that entails the correct and responsible use of our abilities as human beings to use reason.

In showing that religious experience with its different aspects is rational in nature, I do not intend to derive religious experience from reason. To the contrary, religions are not concerned with horizontal transcendence, an expansion of our horizons, a transcendence that always remains an finitude that is stretched to infinity, but with a vertical transcendence that is not constructed by humankind and cannot be derived from reason.

## II. THE TRANS-INTENTIONAL ASPECT OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Experiences of real transcendence are, according to Levinas, not experiences in the strict sense of the word<sup>1</sup>. He puts all the emphasis in the event of Transcendence on the radical other, which cannot be experienced. It remains strange to us, even though it influences us deeply. Levinas emphasizes the difference between human beings and God. A divine revelation entails a disruption of our order. Experience implies intentionality<sup>2</sup>. According to Levinas, in Husserl intentionality is the same as identification: to be directed at something is to identify with, recognize or conceive it<sup>3</sup>. Such a mastering over the object by the subject is excluded in the relationship to God. That relationship is a “riddle”, a “coming between of a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. LEVINAS, *Dieu et la Philosophie*, in ID., *De Dieu qui vient a l' idee*, Paris, Vrin, 1982, pp. 104.109.118.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 97.105.109.

meaning that disrupts the phenomenon”, in distinction from the phenomenon that belongs to our reality<sup>4</sup>. Levinas sees experience as a mastering over the other. One can thus hardly speak of a religious *experience*.

Levinas' critique of Husserl is that intentionality is characterized by adequacy, the complete agreement between intentionality and that which is the object of the intention<sup>5</sup>. By thus understanding the relationship to the other along the lines of adequacy, the difference between the self and the other is destroyed; the other is translated into terms of myself. Precisely in that lies, according to Levinas, the difference from our relationship to God. For the idea of the infinite is precisely characterized by inadequacy<sup>6</sup>. Levinas shows this by resorting to Descartes: the idea of the infinite is not produced by me nor equal to me. I am a finite substance and cannot therefore derive at the idea of the infinite from myself. This idea is derived from a substance that is itself 'truly infinite', according to Descartes<sup>7</sup>. God or the idea of the infinite is thus not an object of intentionality which sees the relationship with the other as a matter of adequacy.

In order to conceive of God in the way that Descartes indicates, we must, according to Levinas accept that the consciousness is not exclusively intentional. The relationship with God has to do with a relationship without intentionality, with a thinking that is no longer characterized by an aim, with a relationship that displays no will or intention. That is possible because there is also a non-intentional consciousness, an indirect consciousness, “certainly immediate but without intentional directedness, implicit and purely accompanying”<sup>8</sup>. This pre-reflective consciousness is not an act but pure passivity. Levinas formulates it in ethical categories as a “bad conscience: without intentions, without the protective mask of the person who with ease and airs and graces emulates the world”<sup>9</sup>. Because of this non-intentional

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<sup>3</sup> ID., *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1949, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> ID., *Énigme et phénomène*, in *Esprit* 33 (1965) 1128-42, reprinted in ID., *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1988, pp. 203-217.

<sup>5</sup> This criticism of Husserl needs to be nuanced. See R. WELTEN, *Fenomenologie en beeldverbod bij Emanuel Levinas en Jean-Luc Marion*, Budel, Damon, 2001, pp. 42f.

<sup>6</sup> E. LEVINAS, *Totalité et Infini*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1974, p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g. ID., *Dieu et la Philosophie* (n.1), pp. 104-08.

<sup>8</sup> ID., The non-intentional consciousness (1982), FT: *Entre Nous*, Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre', Paris, Grasset, 1991, 146.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 147

consciousness, this more than subjective ability, one can be in a relationship to God. That is, given the asymmetrical nature of the relationship, not a relationship in the second person, not an I-Thou relationship. God is not only not an object but also not a conversation partner<sup>10</sup>. God reveals himself only through one's fellow human being and in an ethical sense. Others, such as the orphan, the widow and stranger address me from a superior position because they call me to responsibility. Something of God's transcendence radiates from them because God has a covenant with them. The dimension from which God speaks to me – 'beyond being' is that of the third person, who always remains a He<sup>11</sup>. The other finds himself in the trace of this Absence that in an unascertainable way has passed by, just as Moses saw the back of God. There is thus no mutuality in the relation to the Other but only asymmetry. The call, God's word, bring me into a non-intentional awareness of that which is elusive.

Levinas points out correctly that Transcendence must be conceived of as vertical and not horizontal in the sense of a continuation of our human reality. Therefore our idea of God does indeed fall outside human intentionality as directedness at the other. Descartes' idea of the Infinite and Anselm's description in the ontological proof of God's existence as "that which nothing greater can be thought" indicate this. However, the following objections can be made against Levinas:

1. Without a doubt, Levinas demonstrates the influence of the transcendent call to human action, but by not speaking of religious experience he seems to place the relationship to God in a category by itself. Can we nevertheless speak of religious experience, an experience that occurs in and with respect to situations in the world, and thus in and with respect to the intentional relations of human beings with their environs? That then indicates that religious experience in one way or another has something to do with intentionality. One should remember here that Levinas *provides a one-sided view of intentionality by viewing this as theoretical intentionality, as directedness of a subject to an object*. If intentionality is viewed in that way, it is then difficult to point to any kind of connection. There are, however, other forms of intentionality in which religious experience can occur. There is also a pre-theoretical intentionality, the intentionality for life, in which objects are not involved. Can the so-called non-intentional consciousness not have to do with this intentionality for life in which openness for vertical religious Transcendence is guaranteed?
2. It is one-sided to speak of the relationship to God only in the third person. Is the language

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<sup>10</sup> ID., *Dieu et la Philosophie* (n.1), p. 115.

of invocation, lament and dispute directed by humans at God (second person) philosophically inconceivable? It is, in addition, one-sided to speak of God only in terms of ethics.

To proceed any further, we must first say something about intentionality. Apart from theoretical intentionality, there is also intentionality for life. What this means can best be seen in contrast to the way in which Husserl views intentionality.

Husserl's phenomenology views intentionality as immanent in the consciousness. As a rule, we proceed on the assumption that there is world that exists independent of ourselves. Husserl calls this view a product of the natural disposition. In the 'phenomenological reduction' this natural disposition is suspended, through which the phenomenal world appears as meaning in relation to my consciousness. The consciousness has an act of ideation (*Wesensschau*) of the essential nature of something, separate from the continually changing visible world. The psychological ego living in the world becomes a transcendental ego of intentional acts for which the world is the meaning-correlate. It is for that reason that Husserl's phenomenology is called transcendental phenomenology. That which is directed at the consciousness is not the object outside of me but the correlate of the consciousness and therewith, according to Levinas' interpretation, the conscious "willed"<sup>12</sup>. Experience is thus viewed as theoretical through the abstraction that occurs through the phenomenological reduction from the actuality in which the acts occur. For Husserl, experience is an abstraction from daily experience.

Husserl places all the stress on the world that appears to us does so as a function of our apparatus of knowing. In itself that is correct, but idealism, i.e. the view that we ourselves are the origin of the world is lurking in the background. That, however, goes contrary to our self-experience. Does Husserl not run into a dead end with his phenomenological reduction? We should do justice, in one way or another, to the experience of dependence in the pre-reflective areas of our existence, as Husserl's students do.

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur put all the stress, with respect to intentionality, on the

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<sup>11</sup> E. LEVINAS, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1974, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> ID., The non-intentional consciousness (1982), FT: *Entre Nous*, Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre', Paris, Grasset, 1991, 145.

outside aspect of the consciousness<sup>13</sup>. Human existence is being-in-the-world. Their existential-hermeneutical phenomenology rejects Husserl's transcendental phenomenology but can do take up the later Husserl's concept of 'Lebenswelt'. The phenomenology of the later Husserl is, namely, more empirical and the world is no longer situated 'in' the consciousness. Agreeing with this, the existential-hermeneutical phenomenology of Husserl's students attempt to rediscover, behind the objectification and explanations of the science of history and sociology, the lived historical experience that precedes and supports these objectifications and explanations.

The issue here is intentionality for life, which is present in different gradations. This pre-theoretical intentionality of daily life is to be distinguished from theoretical intentionality as that functions in science, where a subject stands over against an object. The first concerns daily life and refers to the pre-predicative involvement of the human being with the world, persons, and things, in which the issue is being in direct relationship to these things instead of objectifying oneself over against them. I do not study the flower; it makes me joyful through its color and splendor. This pre-theoretical intentionality has to do with people in their individuality, in the daily, familiar way of interacting with what comes one's way. The second refers to the distancing attitude of science, of the subject over against the object. This attitude of distance is not a primary but a derivative way of being in the world. Both forms of intentionality are closely associated. Our 'Lebenswelt' is a reservoir of meanings that makes an objectifying and theoretical explanatory attitude possible.

For me, religious experience occurs in the sphere of daily life with its intentionality for life. But this does not yet touch upon the uniqueness of religious experience. Intentionality for life is a matter of mundane relationships and religious experience, as concern with religious Transcendence, is not limited to that. The relationship with God is not only not a relationship with an object (theoretical intentionality) but differs just as much from pre-theoretical relationships in daily life, such as the use of things as 'instruments' at work or the interpersonal relationship of friendship.

The question is how the event of religious Transcendence can occur in and to the world in which we live. Schleiermacher has, in my view, given an answer to this by indicating how the relationship to God on the one hand is 'immediate' and, on the other, how it occurs in and within daily life with its intentionality for life. He also shows that the relationship to God

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<sup>13</sup> On Heidegger see A. VERBRUGGE, *De verwaarlozing van het zijnde*, Nijmegen, Sun, 2001, pp. 41-45; M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945; P. RICOEUR, *Husserl: An Analysis*

includes more than the ethical. These are two issues that I indicated as problematic in Levinas.

Schleiermacher describes the relationship to God as a feeling of absolute dependence and sees it as situated in the immediate, non-reflective consciousness. The point of contact between God and human beings lies in the immediate consciousness and does not concern an ethical relationship but the whole person. The immediate consciousness is the 'immediate presence of whole undivided Being', also indicated by the word 'feeling' which is liable to misunderstanding. 'Feeling' is not viewed as an emotion but as the heart of the human being. This original consciousness precedes knowledge and action. Although distinguished from it, this non-reflective consciousness of the human being is connected to his intentional consciousness (for life) with his emotions, actions and knowledge. The passive, non-reflective consciousness is the hinge, the 'transition' between knowledge and action; it mediates the transition between moments in which knowledge or action is dominant<sup>14</sup>. It constitutes the unity of knowledge and action and is their common ground<sup>15</sup>. As an example of how this original consciousness functions in conjunction with knowledge and action Schleiermacher points to the first encounter of Andrew and John with Jesus as the Christ (John 1). There is first of all the divine point of contact in the original consciousness and subsequently the insight "We have found the Messiah" and the act of following. He states it thus: "The influence of the Divine [was] the first [...] out of which proceeded a thought and an act"<sup>16</sup>.

In this way Schleiermacher demonstrates that the relationship to God, though from the start non-reflective, asymmetrical and (as far as human beings are concerned) passive, does not exclude language and interpretation. By describing this consciousness as the unity of the human subject, he avoids reducing the whole process to a one-sided ethical relationship to God. The immediate consciousness is the heart of the human being, the unity of our whole being, of our knowledge, action and emotions. The immediate relationship to God does not exist in isolation but receives its concrete content in the intentionality for life, in the intentional consciousness. The 'I' of which we are aware is not a pure 'I' in itself but one that

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of *His Phenomenology*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1967, pp. 204f.

<sup>14</sup> F. SCHLEIERMACHER, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. MACKINTOSH and J.S. STEWART, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1968, § 3.4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., § 3.3; ID., *Der christliche Glaube* (1821-1822) (Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 7/1), Berlin, De Gruyter, 1980, § 8.2.

<sup>16</sup> ID., *Christliche Sittenlehre Einleitung*, ed. H. PEITER, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1983, p. 21.



is constantly in relation to something<sup>17</sup>. In other words, the moment of contact with God does not exist in isolation but in continual conjunction with the human being's involvement with the world, and thus with his intentionality for life. The religious understanding is articulated in and through situations in which the human being is involved.

Apart from the object-less Zen meditation or a specific mystical peak experience, in daily life people *experience* God through a lasting religious experience in and through people, nature and situations. The religious experience does not thereby become an experience of the intentionality for life but is related to it and transcends it by being a religious disclosure. Ramsey speaks here of a cosmic disclosure, an insight through which something receives a depth-dimension and becomes a ultimate concern and commitment. The human being is, in the end, more than an intentional, acting subject. In such a disclosure he goes through and over the intentional relationships which take place in daily life. For that reason I call the relationship to God *trans-intentional*. Instead of using the term non-intentional I prefer to use the term trans-intentional, the relation to God transcends our intentions. Religious experience is a trans-intentional experience with everyday experiences of the intentionality for life. Schleiermacher thus indicates the possibility of a religious experience by pointing to a stratified human consciousness. This, however, does not describe religious experience itself. We will do that in the next section. In the meantime, we can, with Schleiermacher, already state that religious experience is not a self-contradictory concept but is to be defined as a trans-intentional experience. In that sense religious experience meets the demand of rationality in a semantic sense. It is not a vague or unclear self-contradictory concept but is to be seen as trans-intentional.

### III. A DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Now that we have seen that religious experience is not a self-contradictory term, we will look at the extent to which religious experience is rational in character. We must first, however, say something more about religious experience itself and about the concept rationality.

Trans-intentionality is the defining feature of religious experience, but religious experience itself includes other aspects, such as narrativity (religious experience occurs primarily in the form of a story), and affectivity (religious experience concerns the whole person, not only his knowledge and actions but also his heart, mood and emotion). That requires further elucidation.

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<sup>17</sup> ID., *Der christliche Glaube* (n.16), § 9.1.

Religious experience is a matter of ultimate concern. The term ‘ultimate’ refers both to the involvement of the person (subject pole) as well as that in which the believer is involved (object pole). ‘Ultimate’ points not only to the fact that religious experience is a matter of the whole person but that the concern exceeds our finite concerns and has to do with the ultimate. The latter is described above as the trans-intentional aspect of religious experience. It is an ultimate concern that transcends finite concerns.

*Narrativity* concerns both poles of the ultimate concern, the believer and that in which the believer is involved, the faith-content. If we look at experiences of God, such as those recounted in Scripture, then we see that the content of such experiences is often given in story form (Exodus, Kings, or the gospels and Acts). The content of faith also recognizes genres other than narratives, such as the commandments, wisdom literature, poetry, prophecy and apocalyptic literature, but the fundamental form is the narrative of God interacting with people. Where Scripture speaks of God and Christ, that occurs primarily in the form of story. Narrativity concerns not only the content of religious experience but also the way in which that has been appropriated by human beings. The human being is affected in his heart, in his identity. The identity of the human being remains abstract if we do not take its historicity into account: alive in the present, the human being is related to the past and the future. Identity is then best expressed in the life story of the human beings. Identity is narrative identity. Thus religious experience is doubly narrative in nature both with respect to content as well as to its reception.

The second aspect of religious experience, *affectivity*, concerns the receiver. Religious experience is a matter of the whole person. Affectivity is more than emotion: it has the whole person in view: his heart, mood and emotion; it also has a fundamental influence on the insights and actions that arise out of faith. Affectivity is not something irrational, as Heidegger shows in *Sein und Zeit* and De Sousa shows in his emotion theory<sup>18</sup>. Affectivity does not exclude cognition. The understanding makes something coherent out of that which has affected us in our heart. Thus communication about religious experience is possible. With Pascal I say that knowing God is a matter of the heart: “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason”<sup>19</sup>. In religious experience the human being comes into contact with God as an affective being (and

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<sup>18</sup> R. DE SOUSA, *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> B. PASCAL, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, London, Penguin, 1966, p. 154 (*Pensées*, in : *Pascal Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard 1954, fr. 481).

thereby as a cognitive and acting being).

I would describe religious experience as *a trans-intentional experience in which the human being is confronted with religious Transcendence in his narrative identity and in his affectivity, an experience that is recorded primarily in narrative form*. In brief, religious experience is a trans-intentional experience in which the whole person is concerned with religious Transcendence. We should add: Religious experience occurs suddenly, as seen in conversion experiences and mystical experiences. It can also be a lasting experience, such as the lasting experience of faith in which the believer has daily experiences that are stamped in one way or another by his faith: Faith as “experience with experiences” (Ebeling, Jüngel). That is the lasting experience that must be continually nourished by liturgy, Scripture, encounters with people, etc. Sometimes, in addition to the lasting experience, momentary, abrupt and intense experience plays a role. There is interaction between the two. The lasting religious experience can have a preparatory role for a sudden experience and the sudden experience, such as a conversion experience, can bring about a lasting religious experience. However that may be, if I pose the question of the rationality of religious experience, than I view religious experience primarily as a lasting religious experience of the ‘ordinary’ believer.

#### IV. THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Rationality is concerned with the human being – his convictions, values and acts. I view rationality, as I stated, as a normative concept and that it concerns the right and responsible use of our abilities as humans to be reasonable. The statement ‘it is reasonable to believe in God’ refers to a *conviction*. The statement ‘John is reasonable’ refers to John’s *behavior*. The *values* for which people strive are also considered be rational or not. We consider an act that is directed at self-destruction or destruction of society as irrational. Rationality thus has to do with convictions (what is reasonable to believe), with actions (what is reasonable to do) and with values (what is reasonable to prefer). However, rationality is broader. We can also, for example, require of theology that it be rational in character both semantically and logically: the concepts used in theology should be semantically rational and not vague or unclear. Logically, theology should be rational as well. It demonstrates that God’s actions transcend reason but do not destroy it<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> See P. TILLICH, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, London, J. Nisbet and Company, 1968, pp. 59-67. The third demand of theology, i.e. methodological rationality, is of less importance for our purposes.

Can we say of religious experience that it is rational? We do say of a person, a conviction, an act or a value that it is rational. Does that also obtain for experience? Can we ask if it is reasonable to experience something? One can, with the accent on the experiential moment of being touched, say that the person has no choice in the matter, that it does not concern the 'right use of our abilities as human beings to be reasonable' and that therefore we cannot speak of something like the rationality of religious experience. We saw that in the pre-reflective consciousness there can be contact with God. I would say that it is a right and responsible use of our abilities to respond or not to the contact with God. One can speak of choice in the sense that one can choose to respond, to give ear or not to the summons. I further described religious experience more broadly as a trans-intentional experience in which the whole person is involved with religious Transcendence. The lasting religious experience interprets the world religiously and that implies convictions and actions. Viewed in this way, religious experience has rational aspects. Rationality, after all, has to do with convictions and actions.

We can, I conclude, speak of the rationality of religious experience. We can speak so, first of all in the semantic sense. The concept 'religious experience' is not self-contradictory, because experience is not exclusively intentional. But is religious experience rational also in the logical sense? An aesthetic experience is also trans-intentional, but there we have to do with something belonging to this world. In a religious experience as concern of the human with religious Transcendence it concerns an action by God.

I will now take up the question of the extent to which the rationality of religious experience can be determined by discussing the above three aspects briefly, beginning with the trans-intentional aspect.

## V. THE TRANS-INTENTIONAL ASPECT

The trans-intentional aspect of religious experience was described as the aspect of contact between God and the human being in the heart of the human being, the immediate, non-reflective consciousness (Schleiermacher). This still does not describe the (possibility of the) experience as *event*; it simply describes the condition for its possibility in the *human consciousness*. Marion has described the possibility of religious experience as event in his *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*<sup>21</sup>. In this phenomenology of gift he

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<sup>21</sup> J.-L. MARION, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, California, Stanford University Press, 2002. The term 'donation' ('giving') is both a verb as well as the result: the gift (see pp. 61.65).

provides a description of the phenomenon of a revelation by God. Here it concerns what I call the trans-intentional aspect of religious experience. Marion shows that this is not an irrational event but as a phenomenon can be described rationally.

A revelation by God can be conceived as, as Marion calls it, a saturated, replete phenomenon *par excellence*. Husserl held that intuition was the basis for the appearance of a phenomenon. We all look at things from our own perspective, but we do not see them completely. We see only a certain side of the cube from our limited horizon. The phenomenon is thus characterized by a shortage that we need to supplement. It is my intention, my directedness that provides the supplementation and allows me to see the object as a cube. Marion asks: “To the phenomenon characterized most often by lack or poverty of intuition [...] why wouldn’t there correspond the possibility of a phenomenon where intuition would give *more, indeed immeasurably more*, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen?”<sup>22</sup> Mundane examples of such a saturated, replete phenomenon can be found in historical events such as the French Revolution. So many factors are in play here that every explanation falls short. This phenomenon yields more than any intention of the players in that event. There is a plethora of ‘horizons’ that make it impossible to fix the event as an object<sup>23</sup>. Or one can take a painting as an example. The experience of seeing the painting transcends the understanding. It is not, as Husserl’s phenomenon is, an inadequate perception that needs to be supplemented by intentionality but yields excessively more than what the viewer expects. The phenomenon is saturated, replete. We see here that how something appears to us is intensified in the saturated phenomenon. This phenomenon overwhelms me, as when I look into the sun. Instead of there being a shortage of intuition or perception, there is an abundance, and the perception of the phenomenon is no longer dependent on my intentionality. Marion cites Christ as an example of a religious phenomenon: Christ went beyond the Old Testament expectations of the Messiah. The radiant, luminous cloud that appeared during the transfiguration on the mountain makes the disciples fall down out of fear (Matt 17,6-8 and parallel passages in the other gospels). Here the different types of the saturated phenomenon merge together here, whereby the saturated phenomenon is doubled<sup>24</sup>. Revelation is a doubled saturated phenomenon: “giving oneself is revealing oneself”<sup>25</sup>.

Marion conceives of God phenomenologically as gift, God as being-as-given *par excellence*. By way of describing what I have called the trans-intentional aspect of religious

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 228f.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

experience, he argues the following<sup>26</sup>:

1. The term 'par excellence' entails that God contacts human beings as a gift without any limitations. When such happens, the infinite (in quantitative sense) surpasses that which we can see. It is therefore different from many other phenomena, of which we constantly see only a part of it, depending on our point of view. God, however, reveals himself in the way that a cubist painter unfolds all dimensions of an object so that they are all visible. "God reveals himself given unreservedly, with nothing withheld"<sup>27</sup>.
2. This absolute way of appearing is such that it saturates each and every horizon "with a dazzling obviousness". Marion brings two aspects of the saturated phenomenon together here. First of all the dazzling obviousness: the aspect of the saturated phenomenon that indicates that the phenomenon not only quantitatively but also qualitatively exceeds our view infinitely. This overcomes us literally when we look into the sun through which everything is overexposed. "'God' in his very dazzlingness shines by his absence"<sup>28</sup>. One can think here of the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain: "There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them" (Mark 9,2f.).

He also speaks of the *absolute* way of appearing that saturates every horizon. This 'absoluteness' refers to the type of saturated phenomenon that appears without any relation to anything else, in an absolute way. In *Being Given* this type is called "flesh", viewed as unmediated presence in itself<sup>29</sup>. In connection with absolute way of appearing one can think of Jesus' statement that the Kingdom of God is not of this world<sup>30</sup>.

3. The gift *par excellence* can thus change into a gift of 'abandonment'. We try to manipulate and define most mundane phenomena. But that is not possible here. For God as phenomenon *par excellence* it obtains that "here, by contrast, a radical non-availability makes their abandonment inevitable ... it [the phenomenon] abandons itself to the point of disappearing

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 234-45.

<sup>26</sup> J.-L. MARION, *Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians*, in G. WARD (ed.), *The Postmodern God*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 279-96.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>29</sup> MARION, *Being Given* (n.22), p. 231f.

<sup>30</sup> In *Being Given* the saturated phenomenon is viewed according to the category of modality as "not to be looked at", because it, like the 'face' in Levinas, cannot be reduced to the 'I' (Ibid., p. 232f.).

as an object that is possessable, manipulable, discernible”<sup>31</sup>. In *Being Given* this is the general characteristic of the phenomenon as gift. Giving itself is the same as “‘letting appear without reserve and in person’, to ‘abandoning itself to sight’, in short to pure appearing of a phenomenon”<sup>32</sup>.

Marion confirms what has already been stated above. Experience is not defined only by intentionality. The contact with God is also an experience, even if it is not intentional. Viewed in this way, this aspect of religious experience cannot be irrational but is rather to be viewed as rational in the sense that it is to be described philosophically as a saturated phenomenon *par excellence*. This aspect of religious experience is rational not only semantically but also logically as a paradox *par excellence*<sup>33</sup>. It concerns a paradox in the sense that it transcends all human expectations and possibilities. God gives himself as a gift without “forethought, without measure, without analogy, without repetition- in short, it remains unavailable”<sup>34</sup>. An action by God to people does not destroy reason but transcends it as a paradox *par excellence*.

Thus, we can speak rationally of religious experience as a saturated phenomenon. This is the first step to answering the question of whether speaking of religious experience entails fideism, the view that it cannot be discussed by means of rational argumentation. We will therefore look at the other two aspects of religious experience. The question of the rationality of religious experience does not concern only the trans-intentional aspect but also the content of religious experience *and* the acceptance of the religious message. As far as the content is concerned, this can have to do with the rationality of the central truths such as God as person, God as the triune God, the incarnation, etc. I will limit myself to the *form* of the content of faith that, as stated, is primarily narrative in nature. I will indicate that telling a story is a form of argumentation and that stories like the gospel stories can give an explanation for the paradoxical event that a human being can be full of power and at the same time be the suffering Son of Man.

## VI. THE NARRATIVE FORM OF THE CONTENT OF FAITH: THE NARRATIVE EXPLANATION

To follow a story is to follow a contingent course of events and that seems like following an

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<sup>31</sup> MARION, *Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians*, p.292f.

<sup>32</sup> Id., *Being Given* (n.22), pp. 74. 60.90

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

argument, whereby the question is: is it convincing? The narration and description of an event is at the same time an explanation. Is the story convincing in what it wants to assert? The reader is – and that constitutes the excitement in a story – constantly surprised by the turns the story makes, by the circumstances and the reactions of the characters in the story. Is the story successful in bringing together the heterogeneous givens and therewith in giving an *explanation* for the events? Explanation here is something different from explanation in the sciences – it is not predictive in nature. In history we have to do not only with the actions of people but also with unintended consequences. A gospel story is even more complex because it also shows how God’s plan and the actions of human beings, of Jesus and his opponents, come together. Mark shows this in his story of the events that lead to the crucifixion of Jesus. At issue here is a different kind of explanation than one that explains them on the basis of laws. Von Wright speaks of a *quasi-causal explanation*, by which he has in view the “internal coherence” in a historical story<sup>35</sup>. In a historical event we come across coherences that are neither logical nor empirical and thus do not fit well into the classical division of rational ‘ideas’ and empirical facts<sup>36</sup>. The plot in the gospel story by Mark, for example, has what Ricoeur calls the characteristic of “discordant concordance”, contradictory agreement. Mark tries to explain how Jesus combats demons and liberates people from them and is at the same time the suffering Son of Man.

Stories thus have an *argumentative power*. They can serve as arguments both in religion as well in law cases. The plot fulfils the function of deduction in a formal proof. For someone who is the perpetrator of a crime we do not often have silent witnesses such as DNA or fingerprints but only explanations, i.e. stories, by witnesses who can show convincingly how the facts hang together can be used as evidence so the judgement of guilty or not guilty is beyond reasonable doubt. The gospel story also gives an explanation for the actual event that a just person died on the cross but was resurrected from the dead. Mark provides this by, for example, placing Jesus’ death in the context of the explanation of God’s eschatological struggle with Satan, the powers of destruction. Mark explains why the events happened as they did and how power (Jesus’ miraculous power against the destructive powers) *and* weakness (his suffering as sacrifice, as service) go together. In this way he is the Son of God.

Rationality does not only concern the content of faith and its form but also the receiver

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<sup>34</sup> MARION, *Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians*, 293.

<sup>35</sup> G.H. VON WRIGHT, *Explanation and Understanding*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1971.



of the testimony to Transcendence. To what extent is the receiver rational in his acceptance of the content of faith? The status of the believer is that of witness. He himself, like the prophets, receives a message or is dependent on the message that others have received. To what extent is the witness reasonable with respect to the acceptance of this witness?

## VII. THE RATIONALITY OF THE BELIEVER: BELIEVING IN

For the question of the extent to which the witness is reasonable in accepting the message, we must determine the nature of the message. Belief concerns convictions of non-geometrical nature that demand our commitment and touch our whole being, our affectivity. We described faith-knowledge as knowing God with the heart. Faith-knowledge is affective-cognitive in character. Pascal speaks in this connection of *le sentiment* and Schleiermacher of feeling in the sense of heart. The understanding bases itself on principle and proof, whereas the heart follows its own dictates. Faith-knowledge is concerned with knowledge that has to do with love<sup>37</sup>.

Kant also has the unique nature of faith convictions in mind when he refers to it as *Vernunftglaube*. The content of faith convictions therewith falls outside the epistemological distinction between knowledge and opinion. It is not just an opinion but has to do with our life orientation about which we do not speak in terms of accidental opinion but of ultimate concern. Neither is it any form of scientific knowledge. Faith convictions are after all not to be arrived by scientific, deductive or inductive means. Faith convictions for Kant are a matter of 'ideas' in distinction from those of (natural) science *and* historical reality. The latter is, in my view however, in conflict with the historical character of faith. The witness to faith is anchored in history, with its salvific facts of the cross and the resurrection. The question of the historical trustworthiness of the Old and New Testament is of course a matter for historical criticism. Even if one, as a historian, would agree with the historical hints for the story told by the evangelists, that does not say that one accepts the story as a believer. At issue is more than the historical side of it. The question of historical anchoring is a necessary condition for the acceptance of the witness but not a sufficient condition. The sufficient condition consists in the acceptance of a witness as presenting truth pertaining to life and has the character of an act of trust. This truth is primarily existential truth but presupposes an

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<sup>36</sup> T. DE BOER, *Langs de gewesten van het zijn*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 1996, p. 288.

<sup>37</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, p.122 (*Pensées*, in : *Pascal Oeuvres Complètes*, Éditions Gallimard 1954, fr. 72).

anchoring in history. For that reason faith convictions are better characterized as *professions*, as a *believing-in* than as *Vernunftglaube*. The profession concerns the truth of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (truth as historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*)) and presupposes the historical life of Jesus (truth as history). A false witness – false in the twofold sense of inauthentic (in the existential sense) and untrue (in the historical sense) is always possible. Believing is vulnerable and full of risks.

Believing in, profession, is a question of trust, because witnesses can be false. That does not make believing-in irrational. The reasonableness of accepting a witness stands and falls with the inquiry into the trustworthiness of the witness. To witness to someone or something is, if it concerns a religious witness, a way of acting and speaking, whereby the whole person and his authenticity is involved. Witnesses can be tested as to their trustworthiness, as in mystical literature tests have been developed to establish the authenticity of a witness<sup>38</sup>. We need to approve witnesses critically who differ with respect to facts that can be established as well as with respect to pure opinion.

Is it rational to accept a belief or a witness? The answer is yes according to the model of rationality called ‘Presumptionism’. The principle of Presumption is: It is rational to accept a belief /a witness unless there are good reasons to cease from thinking that it is true.<sup>39</sup>

If we see that the trans-intentional aspect of religious experience can be described philosophically as a saturated phenomenon, that biblical stories in their narrative form give a narrative explanation of the faith that Jesus is the Son of God and that the acceptance of the biblical witness is a matter of believing-in whereby true and false witnesses need to be distinguished, then religious experience is rational in nature. Speaking of religious experience does not entail fideism, because one can talk about it rationally, as I have shown, by means of the three aspects of religious experience.

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<sup>38</sup> L. van Hecke, *Bernardus van Clairveaux en de religieuze ervaring*, Kapellen/Kampen, Pelckmans/Agora, 1990, 125-135.

<sup>39</sup> M. Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life*, Notre Dame, Notre Dame University Press 1995.

Summary Stoker will investigate the extent to which living on the basis of a lasting religious experience can be discussed rationally. Religious experience is described as a trans-intentional experience in which the human being is confronted with religious Transcendence in his narrative identity and in his affectivity, an experience that the Schriptides recorded primarily in narrative form. He shows that the trans-intentional aspect of religious experience can be described philosophically as a saturated phenomenon, that biblical stories in their narrative form give a narrative explanation of the faith that Jesus is the Son of God and that the affective acceptance of the biblical witness is a matter of believing-in whereby true and false witnesses need to be distinguished. Religious experience is therefore rational in nature and does not entail fideism.

Stoker will investigate the extent to which living on the basis of a lasting religious experience fideism, the view that religious experience cannot be discussed rationally.